DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 795 PS 028 399

AUTHOR Guha, Smita
TITLE In Search of Enlightenment: Curriculum for the Children at Risk in India.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Conference and Exhibition of the Association for Childhood Education International (Baltimore, MD, April 17-20, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; Disadvantaged Environment; *Disadvantaged Youth; Economically Disadvantaged; *Educational Opportunities; Educationally Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *High Risk Students; Literacy; *Nonprofit Organizations; Nontraditional Education; Poverty; Poverty Areas; Program Descriptions; *Slum Environment; Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS *India (Calcutta)

ABSTRACT

"Udbhas," which means "expression," is a non-profit organization founded in 1988 to spread literacy and promote post-literacy education among the underprivileged children in the slums of Calcutta, India. This paper describes the creation, work, and benefits to children of Udbhas. The paper notes that most of the organization's teachers are volunteers; classes are held in the open air with no permanent building. Forty children from the slums comprise the student body, and classes are held every day from 6:30 to 10:30 a.m. There are no tuition fees, and books and pencils are given free. In addition, Udbhas provides the children with free breakfast daily and clothes several times a year. The paper includes brief personal stories from children who have benefited from participation in Udbhas and concludes by noting that educators are in a position to bring organizations such as Udbhas to the notice of society, and thereby help more children. (EV)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

In search of enlightenment: Curriculum for the children at risk in India

ED 439 795

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

Smita Guha

Temple University

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Smita Guha
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

With one billion people, India constitutes one-fifth population of the world. The diversity of the culture weaves a unique fabric of people but prominently bordered by economic segregation. Having one-third of the population living in poverty, and the rate of literacy being fifty seven percent, India is also one of the lesser economically developed countries in the world. Some blame over population, and some condemn illiteracy to be the primary cause of the crisis. Along with a strong upper middle class and lower middle income group, India has a large population living in the slums, and whose financial bondage keeps them working round the clock. To them, in particular, education is a distant cry; it is a luxury they could never afford. Although there is a government policy on mandatory education, the implementation of the law isn't in effect. These poor people toil hard to have their both ends meet, and raise their family and children in conditions totally unacceptable in the western world. The children, who are born in these poor families, are the children of lesser god, and being raised through sufferings, they experience the hardship of life at a very tender age. In summer, their dwellings get unbearably hot, so they escape from their smaller huts to rest under shades of large trees; during monsoon, as water from the streets seep into their rooms, and rain pours down through the cracks on the roofs, they huddle to take temporary shelter somewhere near, and the winter chill makes their teeth chatter as cool breeze tickles them through

0283969

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

numerous holes in their clothing. Life goes on as these children face harsh weather and hostile environment with a faint ray of hope that next day will be a better day for them. It is that hope which gives them the courage to live and they all dream for the brighter day to come, sweeping away the darkness from their life. These children in the slums in Calcutta have the motivation to learn and they indeed are in search of enlightenment.

"Udbhas" is a non-profit organization, founded for the sole purpose of formed spreading literacy and promote post-literacy education among the underprivileged children in the slums of Calcutta in India. "Udbhas" means expression, and the name befits the objective of the organization that took shape in January 1988. It started when the founder of the organization, met with the slum dwellers from a certain part of the city of Calcutta and asked them to send their children for couple of hours for a fun–filled afternoon. The activities were to be held in a neighborhood park, adjacent to a big lake in the city. The children, she said, could dress up however they want to and would engage in fun activities for the afternoon; food will be served and prizes will be given at the end. She also mentioned that participation is voluntary, but who ever will participate, will receive a prize as well. It is indeed a challenge for a person who is from a middle class, particularly a woman, to approach the slum dwellers for such an event. It is a courageous act in crossing the social barriers and get involved with the people in the slums. In fact, it is small but a difficult hurdle to cross for a greater cause that is simply noble.

To slum dwellers, her proposal came as a silver lining, as it provided an opportunity for their children to be away from their daily hardship and engage in better activities. The children could not wait for that very day to come. It was an eventful day for the children who participated. To them, it represented the dawn of their future. They

loved the activities so much that they wanted to come again. When the day was over, the founder persuaded the slum dwellers to send the children again for learning how to draw and paint, how to recite, learn handwriting etc. To the slum dwellers, it was a holy grail; they could see their children really learn something without having to pay for it which otherwise they couldn't have afforded.

When the children came next time, they were given a lesson in art. Children were shown different objects and they tried to draw the pictures of the objects they liked. Teachers at "Udbhas" also taught them to write their names. As these children continued their activities, they were given milk and bread to fill their empty stomach.

Most of the teachers at "Udbhas" are all volunteers. They are also members of the organization. With dedicated efforts from a handful of members, "Udbhas" holds it's classes particularly for beginners and for the school dropouts. Classes are held in the open air, with no permanent roof over its head. Forty slum children comprise the student body, and classes are held everyday from 6:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. in the open ground. At times, when situation permits, "Udbhas" members would arrange a temporary room to hold evening classes. There are no tuition fees, and books and pencils are given free. In addition, "Udbhas" provides these children with free breakfast every day and also distributes new garments among the students once a year. Used clothes are normally provided to these children three times in a year.

For these forty slum children in Calcutta, it is a morning walk to another world (Bose, 1997). It's indeed a greener pasture which is only a few blocks away from their homes in the slums, and away from the physical abuses, drunken brawl and unlivable conditions where they lock themselves inside their shacks and pray for dear life (Bose,

1997). It's a short stroll but a large leap into a newer horizon under an open blue sky. They wipe their running noses on the sleeves and bend down to scoop a little lump of soil as much as their two palms will hold. What are they upto? With their little hands and imaginative minds they will make clay models. At the end there will be lots of clay elephants, birds, and flower vases made by these children. They love these activities, as they bring out the best in them.

Every morning these children come together on a stretch of green near a lake. They are the students of "Udbhas" where young volunteers teach the poor, and unprivileged slum children to read and write. For the last twelveyears, without a single roof over their heads, "Udbhas" has been tending the light of learning in the little souls every morning. With the light of dawn "Udbhas" children pore over their exercise book and begin the first lesson of the day. Throughout the week, besides regular learning, there are classes in recitation and elocution. Children at "Udbhas" get involved in the tree-planting program. They enjoy planting seeds when reading books on planting.

It's not just all work at "Udbhas". All music lessons are given on Friday evenings, and on Sundays, sewing, drill, and clay-modeling classes are held. Children dig their fingers into lumps of clay and shape models of elephants, peacocks, flower vases and ducks. Young Laltu is quite baffled because he cannot quite get the elephant's head right. He rummages in his bag and fishes out a drawing book. "I can draw elephants", he says and he can, there's no doubt. Two little elephants take off in a parachute in a sketch. Giraffe and tigers done in crayon stare out from the pages. In one sketch, a little boy and girl go fishing in a boat. "We get these pictures from books. But here's what my school looks like", and he turns the page. In front of a building, stands a boy with his

school bag. It's indeed a pleasure to watch these young children express their creative minds on pieces of paper. Who knows to what extent these minds will fly should they be nurtured well?

"Udbhas" is not a school, though we teach children to read and write. Our effort is to send these children to schools and assist in their overall personality development", says the founder. "We prevent them from dropping out of school and help them with their lessons. Most of these children work part-time in homes and earn little for their families." "Udbhas" also brings out a quarterly literacy magazine for children where literary articles come from their own students along with some celebrated writers who also contribute.

A sixteen-year-old girl is busy preparing for her school final exam in March. She goes to a school. "I've been with "Udbhas" for the last twelve years", she says as she hems a handkerchief. "Without them, I would have dropped out of school. I needed tutoring and my family would not have afforded it. "Udbhas" is fun, I love my lessons. I've learnt so many things like singing, sewing, clay modeling. And I've found friends. I don't like to stay at home, there's too much of swearing and bad language around. So I get away", she says (Bose, 1997). These children live in environment where they are only exposed to violence, alcohol, drug and abuse. To them "Udbhas" is like an oasis.

Jamuna is only twelve years. She helps her mother in washing dishes, clothes and sweeps floors every evening. She doesn't know her salary, every month, her mother collects her pay. Jamuna's eldest sister is married and the second one never went to school. She says, "The teachers as "Udbhas" encouraged me to go to school and they said that they will help me with my homework….". Jamuna is glad that her friends

brought her to "Udbhas", and she wants to be something in life. The very least she wants to do is to attend college and have a job. These children know that if they don't work, their poor parents cannot make both ends meet. They do not regret to work, and they all love to bring happiness to their family. Tapash is only ten years old now but he knows for sure that he would not like to be a rickshaw puller like his father. Sriram did not join his brothers to sell vegetables in the open market, he chose to come to "Udbhas" instead. He dreams to play polo one day. "Udbhas" will see me through school and hopefully college" he says.

Yes, all the children nurture dreams at "Udbhas". Every morning from seven to eleven, these children know the happiness of being taught with love and caring. The scorching summer heat, heavy downpour, and the chilly winters, cannot dampen their already elevated spirits. "…. it is really hard carrying on classes during the rains", says the founder. "We had requested to build us a raised platform with some sort of a covering over our heads, but all our efforts are all in vain". The organization runs on small donations from patrons, advertisements in magazines and from member subscriptions. Four teachers hold classes in the open-air everyday for a monthly salary of Rs. 100 (approximately $3.33). "It is hard work", says the founder. Many members have not been able to devote time and have left. We survive on donations and try to make the best of what we have". It is yet to have a stable fund, and has it's financial constraints. But it is a great consolation to the organization members that students of "Udbhas" have graduated from schools, attending colleges, and taking vocational training in nursing, needlework, commercial art, or in technical courses. To "Udbhas" volunteers, the task is

never ending. It is a journey where they overcome difficult hurdles only to bring lights these young hearts.

Children love to come to "Udbhas"; they are never yelled at, and they are taught in a playful method. The children take pride in their activities; it helps them develop their self-esteem as they look forward to attend classes every day at "Udbhas". Chitra could not make to class for a number of days as her mother was sick and was bed ridden. So, she had to do her mother's work. But Chitra was delighted to come back to "Udbhas". She started from where she took off. "Udbhas" maintains flexibility, and having no rigidity in the learning process, it emphasize on creativity among children. This eliminates any chances of children dropping out.

Three hours later, it is time to go home. Five children walk back home along the lake, carefully holding little clay figures in their hands. "We'll have to dry them first and then bake them two days later", says Shaon. "We'll have to keep a constant watch. It's best to leave them near the railway tracks where the sun is strong", he advises further.

Children immerse themselves with daily activities at "Udbhas". Their spirits run high as they look up to see the white clouds sailing across the blue sky, and their minds flutter in joyous expression, as they find solace in their heart. These children of lesser god has grown to be resilient and their unfailing belief in their dreams have gone bigger from the day they stepped into the sacred door at "Udbhas". In organization like "Udbhas", they find comfort, which was absent in their own homes. Every day is a better day for them, and they all look forward to see the morning sun as it brings joy to them. However, the day begins to fold, and within few hours the sun will set and bring in another evening. As the night grows, the swearing and abuse will swell and dart into the

narrow alley in the slums (Bose, 1997). At night when the train will whistle by, a few children will count the number of clattering wheels, and they all hope that their little clay elephants or the birds are not trampled upon (Bose, 1997). They all want the night to pass by in a flash so that they could see the light of another day.

Probably, there are centers like "Udbhas" in every corner of the world. The work of the volunteers at these centers are commendable. We, as educators are in a position to bring these centers to limelight and to the notice of our society in general. This will create a general awareness that there are children who are at risk and that they need such centers, which would play a big role in shaping up a literate society. Like children at "Udbhas", children at other centers will also cherish everything they learn, hoping their dream really comes true someday, somewhere.

References

Bose, N. (1997, January 25). Shining through. The Statesman, pp. A2.